

## Home by kikabennet

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**Summary:**

Jim Hopper thinks about his new family and how he actually belongs somewhere

## Home

It's a cold rainy evening close to Christmas. The kind where it's already dark by six pm. Jim Hopper is leaving KFC with a big bucket of chicken and paper bag filled with sides. He stops to double check to make sure there is an extra container of gravy for the mashed potatoes.

"It's in there, Hon," the lady at the counter assures him.

"Yeah, I know," Jim says. "I got a pregnant wife at home who'll make me drive back up here if it's not."

The lady laughs.

"Your first?" She asks.

"Nah, whole house full of 'em," Jim replies. "My oldest is about to graduate high school. Younger two just started."

"Oh, how nice," the lady says. "So this is a little surprise."

"More of a 'Yours, Mine and Ours' kinda thing," Jim says and the employee waves goodbye as he exits.

It's only when the food is in the passenger seat and he's started the engine that he realizes the thought of not mentioning Sarah didn't hurt. He sits there a minute, picturing Sarah's big bright eyes and high-pitched laugh, waiting for the jabbing pain, but it doesn't come. He realizes that it hasn't come in a long time. Not since he'd taken El to her grave, a place he hadn't been since her funeral. El had gingerly touched the headstone and whispered, "Sister."

Jim knows that there will be times that Sarah's precious ghost will randomly haunt his awareness and that it will hurt, but at the same time it's comforting to know that he can think of her freely from time to time and smile.

When he arrives home, Chester the big lovable mutt smells the chicken first and jumps on him.

“Chester, no one likes you,” Jim tells the old dog, affectionately scratching his ears after he sets the food on the counter.

Will, sitting at the kitchen table, grins at the scene because he knows Jim is just teasing. Jim approaches him, studies his drawing and mutters, “That’s real good, Kiddo.”

“You got the-” Joyce waddles in and Jim rubs her arms and then her belly.

“Extra gravy,” he finishes, kissing her and asking her in a murmur how she’s doing.

“Where’s El?” He asks, removing his khaki button down.

“On the phone with Mike,” Will answers.

“El!” Jim calls. “Dinner! Heel toe!”

When there is no response, he says, “Putting a phone in that room was a mistake.”

“JANE!” He calls again, using her real name the way a parent might use a middle name when they mean business.

El finally saunters into the kitchen and they all chat about their day for a bit before Will and El obediently begin to set the table.

“Jonathan working late tonight?” Jim asks.

“He and Nancy and Steve are at the movies,” Joyce replies. “It’s the holiday season so he’s not going to have a lot of off days.”

“Dad, can we go to the movies tomorrow?” Will asks, licking gravy from the heel of his hand as he opens the too-full container.

Jonathan sometimes refers to Jim as ‘Dad’ but mostly when talking about him, but Will has been calling him that for a while now. It just sort of started, the same way El began calling Joyce ‘Mom’. Nobody pushed the matter or asked.

“If I get off early enough, sure,” Jim says. “We still have Sunday’s

paper? Anything good playing?"

They all sit down to eat and Jim teasingly tells El, "Heard there was a phone growing in your ear."

El's brows furrow, confused, but when Joyce and Will chuckle, she gets that it is a joke and tries not to smile.

Chester wines loudly, sitting at Jim's feet and he tells the dog, "Beat it."

Chester thinks this means, "here have this" and puts his big front paws on Jim's thigh.

"Alright, fine." Jim gives him a piece of chicken.

"No, he'll choke," Joyce warns. "The vet said-"

"It's a bunch of bologna, Joyce," Jim tells her. "I've had dogs all my life. You wouldn't believe some of the things they ate."

Joyce rolls her eyes and then starts talking about a breakfast casserole recipe she'd found in a magazine and planned to make Christmas morning. The tree is already up in the corner, presents piled underneath, spilling out almost into the middle of the room. Joyce and the kids have been working feverishly to keep the house spotless because they're having a Christmas Eve party. Joyce has never hosted a party and she's excited. Jim is excited because this will be the first Christmas with the whole family. Only three Christmases ago, he'd been alone in his trailer, drinking and smoking, chomping down on a turkey pot pie. The Christmas after he'd been in the woods looking for El. The Christmas after that, shyly showing up to the Byers with a few gifts and El in tow (despite Dr. Owens' warning). Joyce had still been mourning Bob then, but they had shared their first kiss in a long, long time.

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The kids help Jim clean up and Joyce flutters around trying to do things until Jim rubs her shoulders and assures her that everything's fine. Will and Jonathan now share a room, but Jonathan's hardly ever home so Will retires to play music and draw or call one of the

boys. El sits with Jim on the couch. She always enjoys the few minutes alone they have together. It used to drive her insane when it was just them, but things are different now.

"You and Will get together and find us a movie to go see tomorrow," Jim tells her and El nods.

"Can Mike come?" She asks.

There is no doubt in Jim's mind that she and Mike will eventually get married, probably right out of high school (though he hopes not that soon). He is glad he likes Mike, glad he's a good boy who genuinely cares about his little girl.

"Sure," he says. "But just Mike. I'm not taking the the whole circus."

El has already got up to head to her room to call and ask if he wants to go.

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Jim is the only one still awake, sitting on the couch with Chester when Jonathan comes home. He lowers the volume on the TV.

"That you?" He calls.

"It's me," Jonathan says, entering the living room, holding a container wrapped in aluminum foil. "Mrs. Byers made banana bread for us."

"Be quiet when you go in there," Jim says nodding at the hallway. "Mom and the kids are in bed."

"Yeah," Jonathan agrees.

Jim can hear him rattling around in the kitchen. After a while, he comes out, wiping his hands on his jeans. He washed his own dishes like the good, responsible kid he was.

"Hey, my car's kind of making a weird sound..." he says and even in the dark, Jim can see the embarrassment on his face.

All teenage boys know how to work on cars, but Jim knows that Jonathan is different. He just wishes Jonathan knew that was okay.

“Could be a number of things,” he tells him. “We can look at it tomorrow. I’m taking the kids to the movies if you wanna come.”

“Yeah, of course,” Jonathan says. “All of them?”

“No,” Jim says, letting out a tired laugh. “Just ours and maybe Mike.”

He exchanges knowing smiles with Jonathan and corrects himself. “Probably...”

“Most definitely Mike,” Jonathan finishes.

“After that we’ll look at your car,” Jim says.

“Thanks,” Jonathan says quickly. “Um, good night.”

“Night, Kid,” Jim says.

Later, as he half drags himself to the master bedroom, he hears Jonathan on the phone in his room.

“Yeah, my dad said he’ll look at it tomorrow.”

He smiles sleepily, opening the door to the bedroom where Chester races in before him to claim the foot of the bed. Jim strips down and slides in next to Joyce, kissing her neck.

He remembers the bitterness, reading about Joyce and Lonnie’s wedding in the paper. He remembers running into her at the grocery store with a little Jonathan and infant Will. He remembers moving back to Hawkins alone after he and his wife couldn’t pretend things could work out in their already rocky marriage after Sarah was gone and getting the news that Lonnie had left Joyce. Some bullshit note left on the table about an ‘enclosed life’ and small minded idiots. He remembers seeing Joyce in person for the first time since infant Will in the grocery store sitting in his office. Will was missing. He remembers telling her that he loved her. He hadn’t even said the words when they’d dated in high school.

Now her home was his home too. Her boys were his boys too. His daughter was too. Lonnie was insane for leaving her, for the leaving them because Jim had everything. There was no void. There was no yearning for anything else. He belonged somewhere.

He was home.